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In Nicaragua, Rights Curbs Bring Uncertainty and More Censorship

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Oct. 23 — La Prensa, the acerbic and partisan daily newspaper that has irritated every Nicaraguan Government over the last half-century, was to have carried six stories on its front page on Monday.

Only one, an account of injuries during an exhibition bullfight in Managua, survived the censor's pencil. The others, all covering aspects of Nicaragua's domestic or international situation, were banned.

Since the Government issued a decree suspending many civil liberties last week, politicians, business leaders, Roman Catholic clerics and other critics of the Government have continued acting almost as if nothing had happened. But at La Prensa, the decree is being felt as nowhere else.

"Over the last year, between 20 and 40 percent of our material has been cut by censorship," said Carlos Ramírez, the editor who has supervised production in the days since the decree was issued. "Now it's up to 80 percent and more. This week, we are a paper that says nothing about Nicaragua."

A review of material censored since the decree was issued Oct. 15 suggests that La Prensa is able to publish only a small number of stories that touch on politics or government. Some news developments, such as President Daniel Ortega Saavedra's declaration that he would seek to meet with President Reagan in New York this week, were covered in the pro-Sandinista press, but La Prensa was not allowed to mention them.

A list of the legal provisions sus-

pended under the decree was also banned.

Sandinista leaders, including President Ortega, have said the decree was aimed at preventing the emergence of an "internal front" that would support anti-Government insurgents.

For most Nicaraguans, life is no different than before the emergency decree was issued. The decree suspended the rights to free expression and assembly, the right to strike and most guarantees for defendants. But during the week the decree has been in force, these provisions have not been invoked systematically.

On Sunday, Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo of Managua, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Managua and a hero of the opposition, was cheered by thousands of admirers when, after celebrating mass, he greeted crowds outside a church in the northern town of Estelí. Sandinista policemen nearby made no move to interfere, although the right of assembly had been suspended.

Interior Minister Tomás Borge called Cardinal Obando to a private meeting afterward, according to diplomats, and warned him he should seek official permission before addressing large public gatherings. The diplomats said Cardinal Obando gave no indication he would do so and is expected to celebrate mass in his home town, La Libertad, this Sunday.

Also over the weekend, three leaders of the Democratic Coordinator, a coalition of opposition groups, were summoned for a lecture by one of Mr. Borge's principal deputies, Lenin

Cerna, the State Security Chief. He told them to stop fomenting unrest. Two days later, they held a press conference to accuse the Government of repressing human rights.

"We have not yet been able to determine how far these measures go," said one opposition activist, Andrés Zúñiga, president of the National Confederation of Professionals. "They want to create that psychological fear in people."

Opponents Vow to Continue

Mr. Zúñiga said the opposition would continue to act as vigorously as possible even though, he said, such actions lead to accusations that the opponents are "members of the C.I.A. or following the alignment of President Reagan."

In interviews this week, several diplomats said that Sandinista leaders, principally Mr. Borge, fear that the insurgents could take advantage of discontent stirred up by the internal opposition to launch a campaign of urban terror.

Thus far, there have been no significant urban actions attributable to the contras. Since the emergency decree was issued, Sandinista security agents have charged more than 100 people with plotting sabotage or otherwise aiding the insurgents. But rebel leaders have said they have not adopted a strategy of bombing targets in Managua or other population centers, and will not adopt such a strategy.

On Monday, six days after the decree limiting public freedoms was issued, Vice President Sergio Ramírez Mercado called a news conference and sought to minimize its importance.